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[Burlington County Times](#) - July 6, 2009

DELRAN - The day after the nation celebrated its independence, hundreds gathered along Fairview Street in Riverside and Delran to welcome home soldiers from the New Jersey National Guard returning from their deployment in Iraq.

Heralded by sirens, horns and the rumble of about 50 veterans on motorcycles, the troops smiled and waved to the crowd from atop fire trucks, holding flags and wrapping their arms around family members and loved ones.

"This is like something from when I was young," said Colleen Wirth of Edgewater Park. "I remember parades like this around the Fourth with the younger veterans coming home from Vietnam, but the energy and the happiness from everyone at the soldiers coming home here, it's just great."

The day began with a breakfast for the troops and their families before they boarded fire trucks from Riverside and Delran, as well as two antique fire trucks from Delanco, and began the parade, which led them from Scott and Pavilion streets in Riverside down Fairview Street to Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3020.

Upon arriving at the post, the troops hugged and gathered for photos with friends and neighbors.

"I think it's unbelievable," said Staff Sgt. Richard Corte of the festivities. "I did march in the parade in Trenton, but I'll tell you what, this town really knows how to receive its veterans. I'm really impressed by the turnout and how nice everyone's been to us."

The Warriors Watch Riders presented each of the soldiers with Honor Coins, which they give to all returning veterans, and had a statement read to the troops on the riders' behalf: "You are probably too modest to have me say this to you in person, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your precious gift to me and my family. Your sacrifice and dedication make it possible for us to live free. A nation is as great as the people who serve and protect it and there is no greater gift than freedom. From a grateful American, thanks for protecting us."

First Lt. Matthew Neamand's expression of gratitude for the reception was simple and direct.

"That was the greatest thing I've ever seen today," he shouted to the crowd. "Thank you!"

First Sgt. Thomas Polino also expressed his thanks.

"On behalf of all our soldiers and our families, we'd like to wish our thank you to the VFW and everybody that came out and helped support us," Polino said. "We couldn't ask for a better

return home than we just got today."

The Riverside Historical society then was presented with a flag that was flown over Camp Proper in Iraq on behalf of the 328th MP Company.

The crowd was reminded to think of Sgt. Shawn Taylor of Delanco who is still serving in Iraq and is expected to return home in October, said his aunt Carol Monahan of Delran.

"This is his third tour. I'm very proud," Monahan said. "When my sister called and said we were going on a fire truck, I was surprised. But I'm very, very proud. I'm going to take a lot of pictures and send them to him."

**Congressman John Adler, D-N.J., of the Veterans Affairs Committee addressed the crowd before the soldiers were told to remove their hats and relax with a barbecue buffet, music and beer.**

**"On that parade route, we went past six or seven different churches. People can pray the way they want, they can hope the way they want," Adler said. "We're that way, because of people who fought in World War I and (World War) II, in Korea and Vietnam and ever since then. These guys over in Afghanistan and Iraq right now, facing very difficult circumstances, are there for us. We should keep our freedom precious in our hearts. God bless these heroes that came home safely. We'll keep doing this until every hero is home safe."**